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# **Gendered nationalism: Women and the Scottish National Party**

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## **1. Introduction**

Scholars exploring the basis of support for political parties have typically looked to social and economic factors, pre-eminently class and religion. However, this approach has enjoyed only limited success when applied to ethno-regionalist parties in general (De Winter and Cachafeiro, 2002) and to the Scottish National Party (SNP) in particular. The nationalist basis of SNP support is unmistakable: those who feel Scottish rather than British and those who share the party's commitment to independence are much more likely to support the SNP. Yet Scottish identity and support for independence tend to cut across the traditional cleavages and so analyses of the SNP vote have tended to emphasise heterogeneity, with researchers remarking on the party's ability to win support across social groups (Miller, 1981; McCrone, 1992: 164-66; Paterson, 2006). Furthermore, the few patterns that did distinguish SNP electoral support, such as relative strength among younger voters and relative weakness among Catholics (Kendrick, 1983; Bennie et al., 1997, ch. 8), are gradually being eroded. In the 2007 Scottish Parliament election, when the SNP became the largest party in Scotland for the first time, its support was even more than usually drawn from across the social and economic board (Johns et al., 2009).

However, one socio-demographic variable is strongly associated with SNP support. That variable is gender.<sup>1</sup> There is a marked gender gap in SNP voting. In 2007, the SNP won 35% of men's but only 27% of women's regional votes (Johns et al., 2009, ch. 2), and similar differences have been observed at most previous elections. Meanwhile, the SNP's membership is even more disproportionately male. According to a recent survey, only 32% of SNP members are women. Both of these gender imbalances are pronounced relative to those of other parties, both in the UK and elsewhere. While unusually broad in traditional social and economic terms, the SNP's support is unusually concentrated in terms of gender. The 'maleness' of the SNP is doubly noteworthy given that the party has historically had a reasonable record in terms of the representation of women – at least compared with other parties in Scotland – amongst its senior office-holders and in publicly-elected posts.

The gender gap in SNP support constitutes something of a puzzle, then, and our purpose here is to work towards solving that puzzle.<sup>2</sup> The empirical bases of the paper are two major pieces of

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we will generally refer to that variable as 'gender' rather than 'sex' (although both will be used in a bid to avoid constant repetition). This is not strictly consistent with our data given that both of the surveys used ask about respondents' sex. However, the key theoretical arguments concern gender rather than sex differences, and in any case the term 'gender gap' is ubiquitous in this branch of electoral research.

<sup>2</sup> The paper is thus a response to Grofman's call for 'Political Science as Puzzle-Solving'. As he asserts, 'A key task for empirically oriented social scientists is to find interesting features of the world and try to tell us something insightful that will help us to explain/understand them better' (2001, 1).

survey research: the 2007 Scottish Election Study (SES) and, later that same year, a survey of the entire SNP membership (detailed methodological information about both surveys is provided in Appendix 1). In the two main sections of the paper, we use these survey data to explore possible reasons for the gender gaps in voting and membership respectively. The striking consistency of findings across the two surveys allows us, in the concluding section, to offer a parsimonious explanation for the party's gendered appeal.

## 2. The gender gap in SNP voting

In 2007, the SNP became the largest party in Scotland for the first time. Between the 2003 and 2007 Scottish Parliament elections the SNP gained ten percentage points on the regional list vote and nine points in the constituency votes. Beyond the shift in overall vote shares, another striking difference between those two elections concerns the gender basis of SNP support. According to survey data collected at the two elections, the party drew support fairly evenly from both sexes in 2003. By stark contrast, as noted at the outset, there was an eight-point gender gap in 2007: men were markedly more likely to vote for the SNP. In other words, the gains made between 2003 and 2007 were made disproportionately among men. However, when those two elections are seen in broader historical perspective, it is 2003 rather than 2007 that represents the exception: the tendency for the SNP to appeal more to men than women has emerged persistently in studies of the Scottish electorate (Miller, 1981: 147-8; Paterson, 2006). This point is illustrated in Table 2, which shows the proportion of male and female voters choosing the SNP at various elections – both to the Westminster and Scottish Parliaments – since October 1974.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Percentage SNP voting by sex, October 1974-May 2007**

	1974 (Oct.)	1979	1992	1997	1999 Reg. Con.	2001	2003 Reg. Con.	2005	2007 Reg. Con.
Male		20.2	23.5	24.3	31.0 32.8	21.9	21.4 23.7	20.0	35.2 37.6
Female		14.4	19.5	19.5	23.6 24.6	18.3	20.4 23.9	15.4	26.9 28.2
<b>Gender gap</b>		<b>5.8</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>7.3 8.2</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>1.0 -0.3</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>8.3 9.3</b>
<i>N Male</i>		342	372	321	505 512	228	385 404	311	578 577
<i>N Female</i>		366	429	376	533 555	291	458 482	418	597 599

*Sources:* British Election Studies 1974-2005; Scottish Social Attitudes 1999 and 2003; Scottish Election Study 2007

This gender gap is wide in comparative terms. Although there is considerable variation across countries and across time, gender differences in voting behaviour are typically modest, and in some countries more or less non-existent (Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Studlar et al., 1998; Jelen et al., 1994; Mayer and Smith, 1985). Among exceptions, probably the most prominent is the USA. In the 2008 presidential election, for example, 56% of women but only 49% of men voted

<sup>3</sup> The time series jumps from 1979 to 1992 because in neither 1983 nor 1987 was there a large-sample (N≈1,000) survey of Scottish voters.

for Barack Obama (Center for American Women and Politics, 2009), a seven-point gap fairly typical of the tendency for males to vote disproportionately Republican and females to vote disproportionately Democratic (Seltzer et al., 1997). The SNP gender gap is therefore comparable in size with the paradigm case in the literature, yet there has been little research aimed at explaining it. We begin such scrutiny in this article.

## 2.1 Explaining the electoral gender gap

In the absence of previous studies directly addressing this question, we can look to two sources for guidance in explaining the SNP's electoral gender gap. The first is the recent history of the party. According to leading figures involved in SNP campaigning since devolution, the party made strenuous efforts to enhance its appeal to women voters after survey evidence from the 1999 elections and subsequent opinion polls showed SNP support to be relatively weak in this half of the electorate. There were various aspects to this strategy. One was an emphasis on policy concerns thought to be women's priorities, such as education and health. In addition, senior women including Nicola Sturgeon and Fiona Hyslop were given more prominent roles in the campaign. John Swinney, SNP leader in 2003, was less combative than his predecessor Alex Salmond and was keen to adopt a more women-friendly approach to campaigning.<sup>4</sup> The efforts to win female votes eased rather, however, when Salmond resumed the leadership in 2004. Salmond's style and priorities differed from his predecessor. He insisted that an Asian Scot should be returned for the SNP in 2007 but set no objective for women's representation. The result was that the party slipped further away from gender parity in parliamentary representation: women comprised 43% of the first cohort of SNP Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), but this had fallen to just 25% by 2007. The decline reflects not only the absence of mechanisms to ensure equality but also the fact that gender equality in representation slipped down the party's agenda. On this reading, leadership, party image, perceived issue priorities and the parliamentary representation of women are possible factors determining the gender balance of SNP support. However, there are two limitations to this account. First, it does not account for the enduring gender gap – why is it that, as leaders and campaigning styles change, the 'default' position seems to be a disproportionately male support for the party? Secondly, as is often the case in media (and some academic) treatments of the gender gap (see Miller et al., 1991; Burden, 2008), it tends to treat women's voting behaviour as the phenomenon to be explained. Yet, as Table 1 shows, it is the male electorate whose SNP support has fluctuated more.

The second source of guidance is the research literature on gender gaps elsewhere. This, too, is of restricted use for present purposes in that it has often been couched in terms of the left-right (or liberal-conservative) spectrum, with differences in voting behaviour attributed to gender differences in left-right attitudes or ideology (e.g. Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Campbell, 2004). While the SNP has not been silent on left-right matters, these are not of course the party's *raison d'être*, and voters are much clearer about the party's nationalist positions and priorities than about its left-right stance (Johns et al., 2009, ch. 4).<sup>5</sup> But the links between sex and such

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<sup>4</sup> The party sought to soften its image by using gentler colour schemes in its marketing and campaigning (see, for example, the cover of the 2003 manifesto at [www.snp.org/node/6679](http://www.snp.org/node/6679)).

<sup>5</sup> Besides, when we compare males' and females' voting behaviour in 2007, there is no clear ideological pattern in the differences. Women were rather more likely than men to support the Liberal Democrats, slightly more likely to

variables as national identity and constitutional preferences have not been explored in the gender gap literature. This is not to say that that literature offers nothing to this study; in fact it provides several useful pointers, in particular concerning issue priorities and value differences, which can be applied in the SNP's case.

Given the quantitative approach taken here, these candidate explanations are operationalised via variables measured in the SES surveys. In order for a given variable to explain the gender gap, it needs to be related both to gender and to vote choice and in the same 'direction'. For example, although support for Alex Salmond is strongly related to support for the SNP, it will only explain (at least part of) the gender gap if male voters are disproportionately favourable towards the party leader. It cannot explain the gap if the sexes share more or less the same view of Salmond, or if it turns out that women are actually more favourably disposed to him than men. In that latter case, the leadership variable would actually be narrowing or suppressing the gender gap: females would be still less likely to vote SNP were it not for their leader. In the analyses below, we examine whether potential explanatory variables fulfil those statistical conditions and how controlling for them affects the gender gap.

Two different analytic approaches are used. First, the explanatory variables are tested one at a time, in each case measuring the gender gap net of their effect. Second, the variables are added cumulatively, in batches, and in approximate causal order based on the 'funnel of causality' posited by the Michigan scholars (Campbell et al., 1960) and applied to SNP voting by Miller (1981). This model-building approach gives an indication of whether the gender gap remains when controlling for multiple variables, and of which types of variable do most to account for it. Mention of causality raises a pertinent point about the nature of explanation that can be provided by these additional variables. With the exception of age, sex is causally prior to all of the explanatory factors investigated here. So this is not a case of identifying prior variables that generate a spurious relationship between sex and SNP voting. That relationship is genuine; the task here is to identify those intervening variables through which that relationship operates; what is it about men that makes them more likely (and about women that makes them less likely) to vote for the SNP?

Regardless of analytic approach, the statistical method is the same: logistic regression predicting an SNP regional list vote in 2007.<sup>6</sup> A baseline model was estimated with gender as the single predictor. This produces the odds ratio associated with the basic gender-vote crosstabulation and hence with the 'gross' gender gap of 8.3 points. Re-estimating that model with one or more additional predictors is likely to have at least some effect on the odds ratio for gender. Using the marginals from the original crosstabulation, we can reproduce the data that would be required to generate this new odds ratio. Calculating percentages from those new data results in the 'net' gender gap; that is, the gap controlling for the variable (or variables) added to the model. The basis of the next section of the paper is to gauge changes in the gender gap as different control variables are tested. The results are reported in Table 4.

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support Labour and the Conservatives, and markedly more likely to support one of the various minor parties. Put the other way round, the extra male support for the SNP was drawn from across the ideological spectrum.

<sup>6</sup> In 2007, most constituency seats were not contested by the minor parties. Here, then, we analyse regional list votes because, with more parties on offer, these are probably a truer indication of voters' preferences.

## 2.2 Testing explanatory variables individually

We begin by testing a series of ‘background’ (i.e. demographic and socioeconomic) variables. The first of these is age. This is unlikely to have a large impact on the gender gap because the age profile of male and female voters is not that different. Longer female life expectancy does, however, mean that women are disproportionately represented among older voters. In previous years this might have helped to explain the gender gap, because the SNP surge in the 1970s owed much to support from newer voters and the average Nationalist voter was much younger than the average voter (Kendrick, 1983). However, the age gap in SNP voting had more or less closed by the 1990s (Paterson, 2006) and in 2007 actually reversed (Johns et al., 2009, ch. 2) such that, like women, SNP supporters are slightly older than the average voter.<sup>7</sup> The effect of age is thus to narrow the gender gap and hence, when that effect is controlled, the gap does indeed widen slightly to 9.1 points (see Table 4). As foreshadowed, this impact is small and controlling for the other two background variables, social class and religion, has still less effect on the gender gap. Although both show noticeable variations across the sexes, with men substantially more likely to be in non-manual work and to disclaim any religious affiliation, neither variable proved more than a weak predictor of SNP support in 2007 (Johns et al., *ibid.*).

**Table 2**  
**Effect of controlling individual variables on the gender gap in SNP voting**

Individual variable controlled	Odds ratio (male/female SNP)	Implied gender gap
None (baseline)	1.479	8.3
<i>Background variables</i>		
Age	1.536	9.1
Religion	1.462	8.1
Objective social class	1.495	8.6
<i>Political engagement</i>		
Education	1.490	8.5
Political interest	1.314	5.8
Newspaper readership	1.468	8.2
<i>National identity &amp; constitutional preferences</i>		
National identity	1.669	10.9
View on more powers for SP	1.634	10.5
View on fiscal powers for SP	1.475	8.3
View on independence	1.025	0.5
View on independence referendum	1.590	9.9

<sup>7</sup> There is evidence in 2007 of a curvilinear relationship between age and SNP voting, with the odds of supporting the party increasing until the age of around 70 and then beginning to fall slightly. To take account of this, the analyses reported here includes an age-squared term.

<i>Left-right issue positions/priorities</i>		
Increase/reduce taxes and spending	1.477	8.3
Top issue priority (public services v other)	1.348	6.4
<i>2007 issues</i>		
Preferred local taxation	1.508	8.8
View on Iraq and Trident	1.684	11.1
<i>Leadership</i>		
Evaluation of Alex Salmond	1.299	5.6

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Next we deal with three disparate variables gathered under the broad heading of political engagement. Neither education nor newspaper readership has more than a negligible effect on the gender gap because, differences across the sexes notwithstanding, neither was more than weakly related to SNP voting in 2007. However, the results with political interest are quite different, though. The politically interested were substantially more likely to be men and also to vote SNP. This variable appears able to account for around one-third of the gender gap, which narrows noticeably to 5.8 points when political interest is controlled. The gender gap in political interest is a persistent finding and has a variety of causes (as well as being in part an artefact of the standard measures) (Burns et al., 2001, ch. 4; Campbell and Winters, 2008). Less easily explained is the positive association between interest and SNP voting. However, a comparison reveals it to be a phenomenon specific to 2007: in neither 2003 nor 2005 were SNP voters

disproportionately interested in politics.<sup>8</sup> The most obvious explanation is that interest is driven in quite large part by success. On this reading, being causally posterior to party choice, interest cannot account for gender differences in SNP voting.

Turning now to the specifically Scottish dimension of SNP support, we first consider national identity. Not only has this long been recognised as a key mobiliser in support for the SNP (Brand et al., 1994; Paterson, 2006), but it also has *prima facie* links with gender given that national identity is often constructed and expressed in typically masculine contexts such as international sport or military history (Cronin and Mayall, 1998; Mayer, 2000). Some scholars (e.g. Stychin, 1998) dismiss such arguments as over-simplistic, however, and the SES evidence supports their scepticism. Women were actually more likely than men (61% compared to 56%) to claim Scottishness as their primary identity (when asked to place themselves on a scale running from 'Scottish not British' to 'British not Scottish'). The SNP's particular appeal to men must have some other basis, then, because an appeal based on national identity should have particular attraction for female voters. Indeed, when national identity is controlled, the gender gap widens discernibly to 10.9 points.

Recent studies have found that national identity has limited direct impact on SNP support. Strong Scottish identifiers support the party because such identity generates support for the SNP's constitutional policies (Johns et al., 2009). Before we consider the flagship policy of independence, it is worth looking at some of the other constitutional options that were on the table at the 2007 election. By some distance the most popular option in 2007 was 'more powers', and many voters favouring that option voted for the SNP (Johns et al., 2009, ch. 5). Of course, this could only account for the gender gap if men were appreciably keener than women to see additional powers transferred to the Scottish Parliament. That was the case in 1974, prior to the 1979 devolution referendum when women were more likely to endorse the constitutional status quo. In contrast, in 2007, the 'more powers' option was a little more popular among women. As with national identity, the gender gap would have been even wider (more than ten points) had it not been for women's rather greater appetite for 'more powers'. Meanwhile, when asked more specifically about the transfer of fiscal powers men and women shared more or less identical views. Overall, then, attitudes to devolution cannot account for the gender gap in SNP voting.

With attitudes to independence, however, matters are very different. When asked how they would vote in a straight yes/no referendum on independence, 37% of males but only 26% of females answered 'yes'.<sup>9</sup> Since these attitudes were clearly the most powerful predictor of SNP voting (Johns et al., 2009), it is not surprising that they go a long way to explaining the gender gap in support for the party. Indeed, once attitudes to independence are controlled, this difference narrows almost completely (to 0.5 points, neither substantively nor statistically significant). In short, women are less likely to vote for the SNP because they are less likely to support its cornerstone policy of independence. It is noteworthy that female antipathy to

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<sup>8</sup> The 2005 data are also drawn from an internet survey and so the SNP-interest association in 2007 is not simply an artefact of that mode of survey administration.

<sup>9</sup> Respondents were also asked about their likely referendum vote if a 'more powers' option was also available, and elsewhere on the survey they ranked a longer list of constitutional options in preference order. However the question was asked, there was at least a ten-point difference between men and women in support for independence.



independence did not translate into opposition to the SNP's promised referendum on independence. Women were slightly more likely to support that proposal. This may indicate that such a referendum was seen more as a safeguard against than as a route to independence. Controlling for support for that referendum, the gender gap was slightly wider (9.9 points), suggesting that the SNP's showing among women was indeed improved slightly by their pledge to consult the people on independence.

The next set of variables concern the SNP's issue positions and priorities. First, we analyse respondents' self-placements on a scale running from substantial cuts to substantial increases in taxes and spending on public services. Among the British electorate as a whole, as Campbell (2006) shows, the average male voter falls closer to the right-wing end of this scale, and the SES results show a similar pattern. However, this ideological gender gap is narrow. Moreover, men and women alike placed the SNP almost at the exact centre-point of this scale, implying that left-right ideology plays little part in explaining support for the party and belying any suggestion that women were turned off the SNP because it was seen as too right-wing on fiscal policy. Hammering the point home, the gender gap of 8.3 points is unaffected by controlling for that variable. On the other hand, the gender gap does narrow somewhat when we turn from issue positions to issue priorities. Respondents were asked an open-ended question about the most important issue to them when deciding how to vote in 2007. Again in line with Campbell's (2006) findings, women were considerably more likely to mention the core public service issues of education and health. Yet these did not tend to be the top priority issues for SNP voters. Hence, when we control for issue priorities (via a straightforward 'public services or not' dichotomous variable), we see the gender gap close to 6.6 points. In other words, male voters responded more positively to the perceived priorities of the SNP.

Beyond the longstanding commitment to independence, the SNP's most prominent policy position in 2007 was a proposal to replace the council tax with a local income tax. However, since this stance was endorsed by the overwhelming majority of both men and women, controlling for views on local taxation has virtually no impact on the gender gap. The SNP was also strongly critical of Labour at Westminster's decisions to go into Iraq and to replace the Trident nuclear system, and voters opposed to Iraq and Trident were indeed substantially more likely to vote Nationalist. In line with numerous studies showing that women are less likely (at least in Western democracies) to support aggressive foreign policies (Wilcox et al., 1996; Eichenberg, 2007), it was female voters who were more likely to share the SNP's standpoint on these issues. With attitudes to Iraq and Trident controlled, the gender gap widens perceptibly to 11.1 points, implying again that the SNP's support would have been still more disproportionately male had they taken a different stance on those issues.

The final variable to be considered is evaluations of Alex Salmond, the SNP leader. The SES evidence – from a series of leadership ratings on an 11-point like-dislike scale – bears this out. The mean male rating of Salmond was around half a point higher than the mean female rating, a difference which appears more substantial in the light of the general tendency for women to report more positive evaluations. All but one of the other politicians included on the survey elicited higher mean ratings from female respondents.<sup>10</sup> The upshot is that, when leader

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<sup>10</sup> The other exception, Tommy Sheridan, enjoyed ratings only slightly higher among men than among women. Salmond was the only politician rated significantly higher by male respondents.

evaluations are controlled, the net gender gap narrows by around one-third. Three points are worth noting about this. First, since this still leaves a 5.6-point difference, the abrupt reopening of the gender gap between 2003 and 2007 cannot simply be attributed to Alex Salmond's resumption of the leadership. Secondly, while females were less positive than males about the SNP leader, they nonetheless rated him more highly in absolute terms than any of the other politicians. The implication is that, insofar as leadership can account for the gender gap in SNP voting, this is because Salmond won support from men rather than losing it amongst women. Thirdly, leadership evaluations may be causally posterior as well as prior to party choice: it could be that males preferred Alex Salmond because he led a party to which they were already particularly favourably disposed (for some of the reasons already considered). In that case, differences in leadership evaluations are a by-product and not a cause of the gender gap under study here. That possibility reinforces the need for a composite model with full multivariate controls, as built and analysed in the next section.

### 2.3 Building a composite model

Our composite model is based on the same variables, analysed in the same order, as in the previous section. The only exception is political interest which is excluded given the compelling evidence that it is endogenous to party support. The basic causal structure, beginning with fixed demographic characteristics and culminating in short-term factors like leadership evaluations, is well established and plausible. Things are less clear-cut in the middle of the funnel of causality: reciprocal effects cannot be ruled out and different orders could be defended. That said, the key decision – to introduce the 'Scottish' variables (national identity and constitutional preferences) before the more general issue and ideological variables – is justified by given the nature of the SNP and its support. Since the focus of interest here is again the effect of gender on vote, we do not report the coefficients or odds ratios for the various control variables,<sup>11</sup> but instead again track the changes in the odds ratio for gender and the implied gender gap. The results are reported in Table 5 and illustrated in Figure 1, which shows opening and closing of the gender gap as successive batches of variables are added to the model.

**Table 3**  
**Effect of adding cumulative controls on the gender gap in SNP voting**

Variables added to cumulative model	Odds ratio (male/female SNP)	Implied gender gap
None (baseline)	1.479	8.3
<i>Background</i>		
Age and age-squared, religion, class	1.529	9.1
<i>Political engagement</i>		
Education, newspaper readership	1.508	8.8

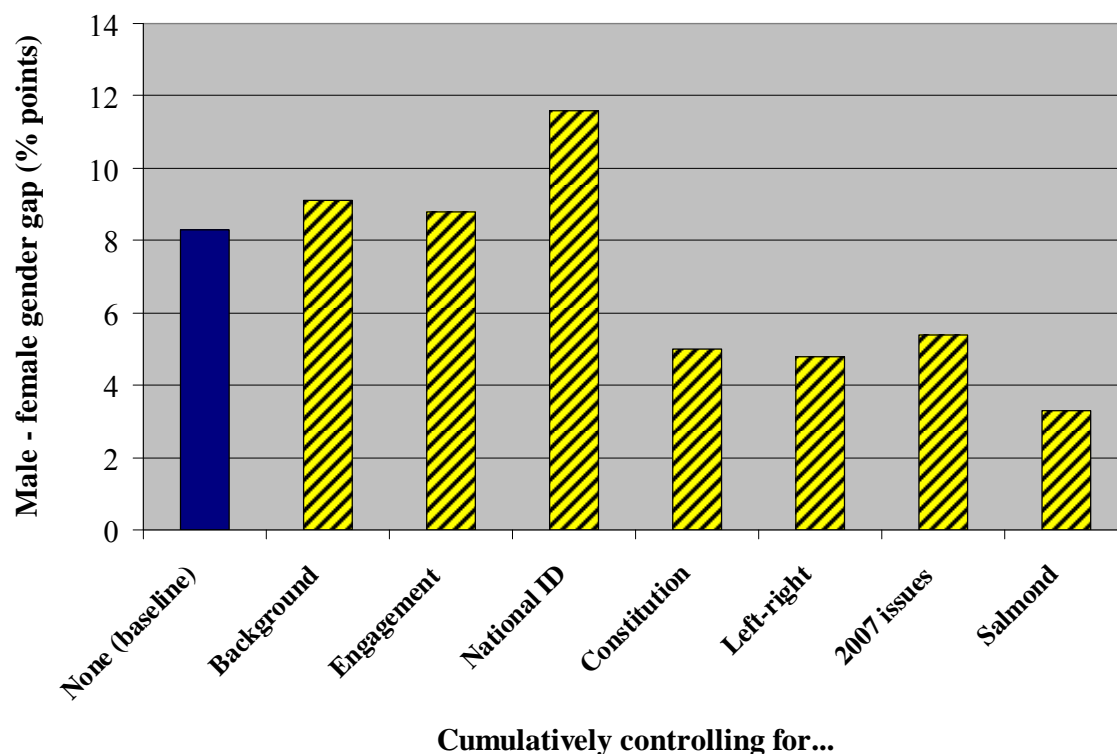
<sup>11</sup> Full multivariate models of party choice in 2007 are reported by Johns et al. (2009).

<i>National identity</i>	1.730	11.6
<i>Constitutional preferences</i>		
More powers for SP, fiscal powers for SP, view on referendum, view on independence	1.264	5.0
<i>Left-right issue positions/priorities</i>		
Taxes and spending, top issue priority	1.253	4.8
<i>2007 issues</i>		
Local taxation, Iraq, Trident	1.289	5.4
<i>Evaluation of Alex Salmond</i>	1.168	3.3

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The broad pattern of results is that which would be expected given the analysis in the previous section. However, the model-building approach here allows us to draw certain conclusions with more confidence. First, demographic and socioeconomic variables are actually serving to narrow the gender gap slightly and so, when they are controlled, that gap opens out slightly. It is not because males have different backgrounds and life experiences that they are particularly prone to vote SNP. Nor is it because they feel more Scottish: again, controlling for national identity serves to widen the gender gap perceptibly. The big shift in the graph is triggered by controlling for constitutional preferences. Once again, then, the biggest single reason why men are more likely to vote for the SNP is because they are more likely to favour independence. However, whereas at the bivariate level the effect of controlling for that variable was to eliminate the gender gap almost entirely, in this analysis a 5-point gap remains. There are other factors at play in the gender-vote relationship. The other most notable such factor is attitudes towards the SNP's leader. Controlling for those evaluations had the potential to reduce the gender gap quite substantially, even with an extensive series of prior variables held constant. Alex Salmond's particular popularity among men is not simply a consequence but also to some extent a cause of males' positive attitudes towards his party. The final point to note is that there remains a gender gap (albeit not a statistically significant difference) of around three percentage points even controlling for all of these other factors. Given that this is around two-fifths of the size of the original gap, we can claim only partial success in our attempt to explain what it is about male voters that makes them more likely to support the SNP.

**Figure 1**  
**Changes in the gender gap with the addition of cumulative control variables**



### 3. The gender gap in SNP membership

The SNP's difficulties in attracting support from women are mirrored – even magnified – when we turn from voters to party members. As noted at the outset, only 31.8% of SNP membership survey respondents were women. To some extent this reflects a tendency pervasive across time and across countries for party membership to be less common among women ([REFS?](#)). However, as Table 6 shows, the SNP has a remarkably low proportion of women by most yardsticks. The results in the table suggest that there is a Scottish dimension to this under-representation of women in party membership. There is little comparable data on other parties in Scotland but, where sample sizes permit a meaningful comparison between a party's membership in Scotland and in Britain as a whole, the proportion of women is always lower in the former case. Nonetheless, the SNP figure is further from gender parity than any of the others – Scottish or British – in the table. The purpose of this section is to account for that disparity, and specifically to assess whether it is driven by the same factors that proved important when we examined the electoral gender gap. Having explored a parallel range of potential explanatory variables, we then look at responses to a question asking respondents directly why they joined the party.

**Table 4**  
**Sex breakdown of membership of different parties**

	Year(s) of survey	% women members
<i>Scottish members only</i>		
SNP	2007/08	32
Labour	1997	35
Greens	1990	45
Greens	2002	37
<i>All British members</i>		
Labour	1989/90	39
Labour	1997	39
Conservative	1992	52
Liberal Democrats	1993	47
Liberal Democrats	1998/99	46
Greens	??	47

### 3.1 Explaining the membership gender gap

The empirical approach in this section is necessarily different. The election study data included voters for all parties and thus allowed us to identify the factors determining whether or not voters chose the SNP. By contrast, the membership survey does not include non-members (or members of other parties). In considering the relationship between gender and SNP membership, then, we are confined to comparing male and female members of the party. Any inferences drawn from such comparisons depend on the assumption of parallel gender differences among non-members. The previous section is therefore useful not only in highlighting the kinds of factors most likely to explain the gender gap in membership, but also because it provided some baseline information about the relationship between gender and key variables – like national identity and constitutional preferences – in the electorate as a whole. Considered alone, the survey of SNP members is severely limited in what it can tell us about the determinants of membership. However, in conjunction with a (roughly contemporaneous) population survey, a detailed profile of male and female SNP members becomes more informative.

We begin by looking at age among SNP members. At 59 years, the average age of SNP members is quite high, making this – as in the previous section – an unpromising candidate for explaining the gender gap. Demographic differences mean that, other things remaining the same, a more mature support is likely to be a disproportionately female support, and indeed the small gap between the mean female age (60.4) and mean male age (57.9) is similar in size to the corresponding gap in the overall population due to longer female life expectancy. Hence the gender differences in the left-hand panel of Table 7 are predictable: the proportions of women are higher in the older age groups. However, if we look only at recent recruits to the party – that is, those who joined since 2005 – then a more nuanced pattern emerges that cannot be ascribed solely to demographic patterns. The first point to note is that, among recent joiners, the

proportion of females falls to just 28.2%. The sharp increase in SNP membership has been achieved even more disproportionately among males. Moreover, the party seems to have had particular difficulty in attracting younger women. Females are especially underrepresented in the younger categories of new members, and overrepresented not in the oldest but in the older middle-aged categories.<sup>12</sup> There is no obvious explanation for this pattern; what is clear is that it does not bode well for any imminent narrowing of the gender gap in membership.

**Table 5**  
**Sex of membership by age group**

	<i>All members</i>		<i>Joined since 2005</i>	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
18-34	24.9	75.1	20.8	79.2
35-44	26.5	73.5	24.0	76.0
45-54	28.0	72.0	29.8	70.2
55-64	34.6	65.4	33.3	66.7
65-74	33.9	66.1	32.2	67.8
75+	35.6	64.4	28.5	71.5
Total	31.0	69.0	28.2	71.8

Another of the background variables considered earlier, religion, is on the face of it a more promising potential explanation for the gender gap in SNP membership. In the population as a whole, as noted earlier, men are substantially less likely (by ten percentage points) to report a religious affiliation. This could not account for the electoral gender gap because (at least in 2007) there was no evidence that the SNP's vote was particularly unreligious. However, there is some such evidence with respect to the membership, where the proportion claiming a religious affiliation (57%) was noticeably lower than the corresponding proportion in the 2001 census in Scotland (67%). Evidence from a religion by gender analysis of the membership is inconclusive. The gender difference in religious affiliations within the membership is exactly the same ten-point gap as in the population. This leaves open the possibility that greater religiousness among women (partly) explains their under-representation in the SNP. But of course the converse could be true: it may be that the SNP membership is less religious because it contains fewer women. Unfortunately, our analyses cannot clarify causal direction so as to remove that ambiguity.

In the electoral analysis we moved from background to political engagement variables. For obvious reasons, the membership survey respondents were asked not about general interest in politics but about a range of activities and involvements within the party. The gender gaps in these variables were typically modest. Overall, 34% of men described themselves as 'very' or 'fairly' active within the party, compared to 31% of women. Men were slightly more likely to attend local party meetings regularly and markedly more likely to have stood for elected office

<sup>12</sup> We do not report significance tests in this section of the paper. With responses from around 7,000 members, almost any difference is significant; our concern is with substantive importance. In any case, given that we were surveying the entire membership, the logic of inferential statistics (which assumes random sampling from a far greater population) does not really apply..

within the party. On the other hand, they were less likely to have canvassed voters by telephone or to have attended the party's national conference. Once again, there are limits to the inferences that can be drawn from these comparisons. Nevertheless, they give the impression that the SNP can call upon active members of both sexes. Gender differences in involvement in the population can probably explain why most parties struggle to attract as many female as male joiners (see Table 6), but they seem unlikely to account for the SNP's particularly wide gender gap in membership. This conclusion is bolstered by the age profile of the party, which suggests that family commitments – an obvious reason why women might be less likely to join – are likely to have eased for many members.<sup>13</sup>

Another possible reason for the membership gender gap is sex differences in levels of political efficacy. This has two broad aspects: internal or self-efficacy, i.e. a feeling of being personally capable of participating, and external or collective efficacy, i.e. the belief that institutions and conditions allow that participation to make a difference. Unsurprisingly, given the upbeat post-election mood in the party, external efficacy scores were high among both men and women. This was true not only on general questions about the amount of influence wielded by members but also on a specific question about gender parity: hardly anyone of either sex (7% of women and 5% of men) agreed that 'the party does not do enough to ensure that equal numbers of men and women are selected as SNP candidates'. Again, then, it seems unlikely that women are put off from joining the party because they see no opportunity to make a contribution or to have a say. However, there are signs – echoing previous findings from surveys of broader electorates (e.g. Vaus and McAllister, 1989) – that women members have a lower sense of internal political efficacy. Women were rather less likely to agree that they 'could have a real influence' and markedly less likely to agree that they 'could do a good job as an SNP councillor'. The fact that these differences persist even among party members tends to arouse suspicions that they may also partly explain why women were less likely to join in the first place. Again, though, it is unclear why this could explain the particular gender gap in the SNP's membership.

We therefore turn to the 'Scottish' variables that are the specific underpinnings of SNP support. As we have seen, there is little difference in terms of national identity between women and men in the electorate. Table 8 shows that this is also true among members, less surprisingly in this case given the strong skew towards the Scottish end of the spectrum. Given that men and women both inside and outside of the party are equally likely to feel Scottish, it seems highly unlikely that national identity can explain the gender gap in membership. There is a potentially important caveat to this, however. This standard measure of identity is relative rather than absolute: we know that men are no more likely to feel Scottish *rather than* British but these data leave open the possibility that they feel their Scottish identity more strongly. We discuss this further in concluding the paper.

**Table 6**  
**National identity by sex among SNP members**

	Female (%)	Male (%)
Scottish not British	77.4	77.5

<sup>13</sup> Only 7% of SNP members have children below the age of five under their care.

More Scottish than British	15.5	16.3
Equally Scottish and British	2.4	2.6
More British than Scottish	0.3	0.2
British not Scottish	0.4	0.2
Other	3.9	3.3

As among the electorate, the results are very different when we turn from national identity to the constitutional question. Just as female voters are markedly less radical in their constitutional preferences, so too are women members of the SNP, more than one in six of whom cited ‘further devolution short of independence’ as their preferred option. Women were correspondingly less likely to endorse the SNP’s official policy of independence in the EU (though, interestingly, no less likely to favour the still more radical option of independence outside the EU). The nine-point gap in support for party policy is more or less identical in size to the corresponding gap within the electorate (whether we compare with the same five-option question as in Table 9 or with a simpler referendum vote intention question as discussed in the previous section). It is also worth emphasising that, among both members and voters, those women who oppose independence do not instead tend to favour the status quo. The ‘more powers’ option is the one that attracts a disproportionately female support. We return to this point, too, at the end of the paper, in assessing likely reasons for the gender gap in constitutional preferences. The interim conclusion is that differing appetites for independence look like a compelling explanation for the gender gap in SNP membership, just as they did for that same gap in electoral support.



**Table 7**  
**Constitutional preferences by sex among SNP members**

	Female (%)	Male (%)
<i>First constitutional preference</i>		
Scotland should become independent outside the European Union	22.3	21.6
Scotland should become independent within the EU	59.4	68.3
The Scottish Parliament's powers should be increased and it should raise more of its own taxes	17.1	9.2
There should be no change to the present arrangements: Scotland should have a devolved Parliament with limited powers	1.0	0.5
The Scottish Parliament should be abolished and all Scottish laws passed by Westminster again	0.2	0.3

Given the prominence of left-right ideology in previous explanations of partisan gender gaps, it is worth looking briefly at how male and female SNP members placed themselves and the party on a left-right scale. A brief look is all that is required since these various placements hardly vary. As with the average voter, the average member places the party slightly to the left of the centre of the scale, and there is no difference at all between men and women in this regard. In terms of self-placements, women were marginally further left on the scale but only marginally (by less than one-tenth of a standard deviation), nowhere near enough to account for a large gender gap even if there were compelling evidence – which there is not – that left-right ideology is a prominent motivation for membership.

The final variable to be considered here is leadership evaluations. Earlier, we found evidence that Alex Salmond's particular appeal to male voters goes some way to explaining the electoral gender gap. It is more difficult to test for such a leadership effect on membership since members of both sexes are likely to evaluate their leader very positively anyway, particularly in the aftermath of the most successful election in the party's history (a victory occasionally attributed to Salmond himself). In this context, evidence that female SNP members were nonetheless more lukewarm in their endorsement of their leader would constitute persuasive (if still circumstantial) evidence that the leadership was deterring women from joining the party. We can explore this via a series of questions asking members to rate a number of senior politicians – from both the SNP and other parties – on an 11-point like-dislike scale. Table 10 first reports the mean ratings given by both male and female SNP members to Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, the leader and deputy leader and thus a prominent male and a female figure within the party. There is no evidence that Salmond appealed particularly to men in the party, as his mean rating was actually slightly higher among females. However, there is evidence that Nicola Sturgeon appealed less to men, who rated her on average more than half a point lower on the scale than did women (although 8.74 out of 10 is scarcely a denunciation). Looking at respondents' overall ratings of male and female SNP politicians confirms that Sturgeon rather than Salmond is the unusual case. Generally women members gave slightly higher ratings than men to politicians of both sexes, and that tendency – itself hardly marked – is more noticeable than any inclination among females to be particularly generous to female politicians. Alex Salmond may struggle to win electoral

support amongst female voters but the evidence here, albeit indirect, suggests that he exerts no such deterrent effect on those already favourably enough disposed to the party to consider membership.

**Table 8**  
**Mean ratings of politicians by sex among SNP members**

	<i>Mean (0-10) rating by sex of members</i>		Difference (female - male)
	Male	Female	
Alex Salmond	9.24	9.31	+0.07
Nicola Sturgeon	8.74	9.31	+0.57
<i>All SNP politicians</i>			
All males	8.12	8.30	+0.18
All females	8.16	8.37	+0.21

### 3.2 Self-reported motivations for joining

The SNP membership survey included the following open-ended question: ‘Thinking back to your first decision to join the party, what were the main reasons that you JOINED the party?’ Responses to the question were then coded into a large number of categories. Multiple responses were possible but here we focus on the first reasons given. These are reported, broken down by respondent sex, in Table 11.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Although coding requires the enforcement of distinct categories, it is clear that there is substantial overlap or at least interrelationship between many of those listed in Table 11. This is an unavoidable problem in the quantification of qualitative data and it means that the results should probably be regarded as indicative rather than precise. Nonetheless, by the yardsticks of standard inter- and intra-coder tests, these codings are at least highly reliable.

**Table 10**  
**Reported reasons for joining the SNP by respondent sex**

<i>First given reason for joining</i>	Male (%)	Female (%)
Independence	47	39
General liking for party	9	12
Anti-union	7	6
Further Scottish interests	6	6
National identity/pride	5	5
Dislike other parties	6	4
Family/social links	3	8
Participation	4	4
Personal circumstances	2	3
Past event/period	3	2
Contacted by party	1	3
Leaders	1	2
Devolution	1	1
Issues	1	1
Other/unclear	4	4

The results fully corroborate the story told so far about gender and SNP membership. Independence is by a very long way the most commonly cited reason for joining the party. Not only are women (whether inside or outside the party) less likely to support independence but they are also less likely to be attracted to the party by that flagship policy. Many of the null findings are also echoed in these data. Expressions of national identity or pride were equally common among men and women, as were more general participatory motivations. Leadership was mentioned by very few members anyway but certainly was not a particular motivation for male joiners. Aside from the now-customary independence gap, the only other noteworthy gender difference is that women were much more likely to report social network reasons for joining, in particular family links with existing members (in several cases their partners). This perhaps indicates that women require a stronger situational impetus to join political parties. However, this tends to explain the gender gap in membership of parties across the board. When it comes to the particularly male profile of SNP membership, attitudes to independence again look the most plausible explanation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Despite its history of prominent and senior female politicians, the Scottish National Party has generally polled better amongst men and has a disproportionately small proportion of females in its membership. Previous speculation about the reasons for this has focused on two factors: first, fluctuations in the party's commitment to and record on gender equality in representation; secondly on the party's leadership. We found some evidence that the gender gap in SNP electoral support in 2007 was partly due to the relative popularity of Alex Salmond among male

voters. Hence it was probably not pure coincidence that, under John Swinney's leadership in 2003, a higher proportion of the SNP's vote came from women than in previous and subsequent elections. However, our analyses reveal a much more powerful explanation for the gender gaps in both electoral support and membership. The cornerstone of SNP policy – and the party's primary *raison d'être* – is Scottish independence. Support for that option is a strong motivation both for its voters and its members. And such support is markedly stronger among men than among women. This goes a long way to solving the puzzle for this paper.

Of course, this simply leads to another gender gap puzzle: why are there differences in support for independence? Addressing this question is a further research task in itself. Meanwhile, we will briefly outline three (out of many) possible answers. The first refers back to a point noted about the measures of national identity used in this paper. Previous studies have shown that feeling Scottish and not British is far from a sufficient condition for favouring independence (Brown et al., 1999; Denver et al., 2000; Paterson et al., 2001). It seems quite likely that support for independence is driven as much by the intensity as by the direction of national identity, and men may feel their 'Scottishness' more intensely. A second possibility lies in the gender differences in issue priorities also mentioned above. Macroeconomics and foreign policy are probably the two most significant areas for which responsibility would be transferred to Scotland in the event of independence, and these are both more often the concern of men. Since responsibilities for female priority issues, health and education, have already been devolved, women have in a sense less to gain from independence. The third explanation is an application of the recurring finding in social psychology and (a little less consistently) microeconomics that men tend to be less risk-averse than women (Arch, 1993; Byrnes et al., 1999; Eckel and Grossman, 2003). The extent of risk involved in Scottish independence is of course strongly disputed but, insofar as its impact is uncertain, there may be reason to expect women to be warier. Adjudicating between these and other explanations will require detailed and tailored measures of the kind that were not available in the surveys used here. Future research should take a comparative as well as a methodological direction. In similar substantive contexts, the Scottish case has often been compared to several others, most often Quebec. That and other cases offer survey data with which the relationship between gender, national identity and constitutional preferences can be further scrutinised.

Our final point concerns framing. Just as gender gaps in voting vary according to the way gender and related issues are presented and discussed at different elections, it seems probable that the gender gap in support for independence will depend on the framing of that policy in party and media discourse. In other words, a greater appeal to men is not intrinsic to the policy of independence but is the result of the way that policy has been defined and discussed. Further research into how and why independence proves less popular among women is therefore of more than academic interest. It could guide the SNP – and, for that

matter, the parties opposed to independence – about how the issue can be framed to their maximum advantage.

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## **Appendix A: Data sources**

### *Scottish Election Study*

The 2007 Scottish Election Study (SES) was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-000-22-2256) and directed by two of the present authors (Mitchell and Johns) along with Professor David Denver of Lancaster University and Professor Charles Pattie of the University of Sheffield. It involved a major panel survey of the Scottish electorate with data collected before and after the election on 3 May 2007. The data were collected via the internet, fieldwork being undertaken by YouGov. The initial sample was drawn from YouGov's panel of subscribers resident in Scotland, and a response rate of 72% generated a pre-election sample of 1,872 respondents. This wave of data collection took place between 17 and 23 April. Of the pre-election respondents, 83% also completed the post-election questionnaire, giving a panel sample size of 1,552 respondents. The post-election data were collected between 4 and 10 May. The analyses presented here are based on data weighted (using YouGov's standard weight) to make the achieved sample representative of the target sample in terms of a range of demographic and attitudinal variables including age, gender, social class, region, newspaper readership and past vote. Further details, as well as an opportunity to read the questionnaires and to download the survey data, are available via the project website at [www.scottishelectionstudy.org.uk](http://www.scottishelectionstudy.org.uk).

### *SNP membership survey*

This survey was also funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-062-23-0722) as part of a wider study of the party. It was directed by the present authors. The target sample was the entire party membership which, as of 8 November 2007, stood at 13,203 members. Between 16 and 19 November, a questionnaire was sent to all of those members. Following reminder postcards in early December, and a fresh mailing of questionnaires to non-respondents in mid-March 2008, the eventual achieved N was 7,112, a response rate of 53.9%. (This is similar to those obtained in several of the other party membership studies in the UK.) In the absence of reliable demographic information about the total party membership, we do not apply weights when analysing these data. Further details are available at the study website <http://www.strath.ac.uk/government/staff/mitchelljamesprofessor/snp/>.